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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
13 June 1984

Washington reacts to the 'Bulgarian connection'

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Washington

The lengthy summary of Italian prosecutor Antonio Albano's report on the investigation of the plot to kill Pope John Paul II, published June 10 in the New York Times, attracted immediate attention in Washington.

"I expected the Italians would come up with more good information," said one former high United States government official, "but the extent of the detail and the depth of the conspiracy it reveals astound me."

"Who can scoff at the Bulgarian connection now? It would take a major effort at self-deception to pretend that the

Kremlin was not behind this [May 13, 1981, assassination attempt on the Pope in St. Peter's Square in Rome]."

At the June 11 morning press meeting, the State Department spokesman refused to make a direct comment on the report. "The Italian government has not yet made the report public," he said, adding that the US "wants to insure that the investigation and any possible proceedings in the Italian courts go forward without the slightest hint of outside interference or pressure."

A veteran Washington columnist who has written extensively on the plot over the past three years reacted sharply. "This is hardly the issue anymore; no one expects the US government to interfere."

The Italians have proved they can do the job without us and they probably haven't even revealed half of what they have uncovered.

"But the time is coming close when Reagan will have to take a stand. It looks silly for him to go to London and talk about terrorism in general and then shy away from condemning the most atrocious act of terrorism the world has witnessed."

So far Washington's large and sometimes contentious community of Soviet and East European specialists is unanimous in conceding that the Italian prosecutor's report fully confirms book-length analyses of the plot published several

months ago by reporters Claire Sterling and this correspondent.

The Italians' meticulous investigations has fleshed out what was previously in part deduction and hypothesis. There are now dramatic new details from Rome of the Bulgarians' meetings with the would-be Turkish assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, both in Sofia and in Italy, and the roles of half a dozen Turkish accomplices.

The Italians have also exposed the contradiction in the alibis the Bulgarians and Soviets have advanced — continually trying to persuade foreign journalists that the case against Bulgarian Sergei Antonov "was crumbling."

Antonov has been revealed to be the secondary figure serious analysts always expected. The Bulgarians pulled the bigger fish out of the pond in time to get them safely back to Bulgaria. The Italians have not found a shred of evidence to substantiate Soviet allegations that the US — specifically the Central Intelligence Agency — was behind the plot. Prosecutor Albano called such charges "archaic cold-war propaganda."

The longstanding Bulgarian connection with narcotics trafficking and arms smuggling to promote destabilization and terrorism in key NATO countries, such as Italy and Turkey, was highlighted in Capitol Hill hearings called by the House For-

eign Affairs Committee on June 7, just three days before the Rome report was published. John Lawn, acting deputy administrator of the Drug Enforcement Agency, declared: "Information collected over the past 14 years indicates that the government of Bulgaria has established a policy of encouraging and facilitating narcotics trafficking through the corporate veil of KINTEX." (KINTEX is Bulgaria's state-owned import/export agency.)

Mark Palmer, deputy assistant secretary of state, told the committee: "The Bulgarians publicly profess their interest in eliminating traffic in narcotics, but their interest appears to extend only to border interception and not to eliminating illicit operations run from inside the country."

Congressman Edward F. Feighan (D) of Ohio, under whose chairmanship the hearings were held, also listened to extensive private testimony on links between drugs, illicit weapons, and support for terrorism and assassination.

Concluding the session, he urged government officials to give higher priority to exposing Bulgarian misdeeds and pressuring Bulgaria to halt these operations.

In light of the new facts that have emerged from Rome, some congressional staff members are exploring international sanctions that could be taken against Bulgaria, such as suspension of its participation in the International Truck Transport Agreement.

Prosecutor Albano's report is only the first of several developments that are expected to bring the plot against the Polish Pope back into the limelight during the rest of 1984.

Judge Ilario Martella's own comprehensive evaluation of the case, which is said to cover more than 1,000 pages, will be released in the next few weeks. It will include recommendations for trials.

Two other major investigations directly related to the plot against the Pope — the case of an enormous arms and drug smuggling rings in Trento and the case of Bulgarian- and Red Brigades-connected Luigi Scricciolo — are still in process in Italy.

In Turkey, the reinvestigation of the killing of Agca's first victim, newspaper editor Abdi Ipekci, launched in December 1982, has resulted in a trial of 24 defendants. It opened in Istanbul in March and is expected to continue through the summer. Most prominent among the accused is Abuzer Ugurlu, "godfather" of the Turkish mafia, who is also a prime defendant in two other smuggling and subversion trials that are running concurrently in Ankara.

The 23 other defendants in the Ipekci trial include Agca and all the other Turks imprisoned in Italy, as well as 11 accomplices who have been arrested in Turkey over the past two years. Many of these figure in the Rome report.

The new Turkish trial, according to Vasfiye Ozkocak, the prominent Istanbul daily Milliyet's expert on the case, "has already demonstrated that the Ipekci killing cannot be explained by internal Turkish politics — it had inspiration from abroad."

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